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Jorge Marco, 'The Spanish holocaust: a review', *Journal of Genocide Studies*, 16-1 (2014)

### **The Spanish Holocaust: a Review**

Jorge Marco

The Spanish holocaust was published in the spring of 2011 in Spain in both Castilian and Catalan. It was a commercial success from the outset, becoming a bestselling historical essay with successive editions. Two years on, readers still enjoy the book. What can we attribute this success to? From my perspective, there are four key reasons: the timing of publication; the author's formidable reputation in Spain; an open and long-running debate on the concept of the 'holocaust'; and the book's inherent value.

Since the mid-1990s, the Spanish have begun to revisit their own traumatic past. This phenomenon has become even more pronounced since the early years of the twenty-first century. The role of memory and Europe's violent past was examined by academics and more widely by European society in the 1960s. In Spain, due to the longevity of the Franco dictatorship (1936–77), this kind of debate was delayed. The transition to democracy in Spain (1975–82) did not initiate new debates. Within a paradigm of national reconciliation, the dominant discourse had two axes: forgiveness and forgetting. In the mid-1990s, a new generation born since the advent of democracy began to break this paradigm of silence. A 'generation of grandchildren' ('generación de los nietos') began to wonder what had happened to their grandparents and why there was a persistent silence about the past. In the public sphere this included the principles of transitional justice, namely an emphasis on truth, justice and reparation. The new discourse of memory-inspired social movements caused generational and social fractures in Spain, plunging the traumatic past into the centre of political and public

debate. The Spanish holocaust was such a success because it appeared at a time when there was great public interest in the issue of violence during the Civil War and dictatorship.

The success of *The Spanish holocaust* cannot be attributed to this alone. There have been hundreds of books covering violence in the civil war and dictatorship since the 1980s, with a marked increase in history publications in the last two decades. We must then ask why, with so many comparable books on the market, has Paul Preston's book been a bestseller? In my view there are two complementary answers to this question. One would be the enormous prestige of the author in Spain. During the years of Franco's dictatorship only those favourable to the regime could study the Spanish Civil War so the role of foreign historians was instrumental in the development of Spanish contemporary twentieth-century historiography. British Hispanists have been noted for their excellent research and Paul Preston has become the most prominent of this group. The fundamental role that his historical writing has played has been recognized in contemporary Spain in the academy and in society as a whole. At this point we cannot, however, ignore the perception that the Spanish society has about its own past. Questions have been raised in social sciences about objectivity and subjectivity, which has been enhanced by the language of postmodernism. This question is even more heightened when dealing with the 'history of the present day' and even more so when it comes to violence and trauma. There is an embedded notion in some quarters in Spain that Spanish historians are not yet able to write objectively about the civil war and the Franco dictatorship because of the recent nature of the events, which are still encumbered by subjectivity. Accordingly, foreign historians could be seen as having a greater objectivity, due to their geographical and emotional distance. By such a reasoning, *The Spanish holocaust*, as the work of a distinguished British historian, could

offer a better 'guarantee' of objectivity than other possibly 'contaminated' interpretations or narratives.

A third key to understanding the success of the book is the controversy that erupted in the media and in academic circles in Spain surrounding its title and, in particular, the choice of the word 'holocaust'. Paul Preston has insisted that his use of the term 'holocaust' is based on the definition of the word given by the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Language Academy and the Oxford English Dictionary: the destruction and large-scale slaughter of human beings. As around half a million people met a violent death during the Spanish civil war, about 300,000 in the battlefield and about 200,000 in the rear, the choice of this word would seem appropriate. After the war, between 20,000 and 50,000 people were killed by the Franco dictatorship, either by execution, maltreatment or food privation in prisons. This number does not include the large number of the defeated who were interned in concentration camps and prisons, convicted by military courts or simply forced into exile.

Despite this undoubtedly violent context, the use of the word 'holocaust' still reverberated around Spain. In many respects this echoed the bitter debates over the use of concepts such as 'genocide' and 'holocaust' in countries with similarly traumatic histories. Newspaper columns, social media and public meetings fuelled a debate 'for' or 'against' Preston, particularly with regards to the use of this term in the Spanish case. Moreover, there was discussion about the validity of comparing the Jewish Holocaust with contemporary events. Despite the fact that there has been some theoretical study on violence, there had been hitherto very little interest in comparative genocide studies in the academic sphere in Spain.

The publication of Preston's book and public controversy about the use of the term 'holocaust' led to a new debate and the adoption of new approaches to the theoretical frameworks by which we can interpret violence and broaden the field of study. Perhaps the best example is the congress held in October 2012 at the Complutense University of Madrid entitled 'Genocides, Holocausts, Extermination', which was coordinated by myself and the late Julio Aróstegui, an important founder of the study of political violence in Spain, and Gutmaro Gómez Bravo. The purpose of the congress was to address the debate that The Spanish holocaust had raised. The fundamental idea was to question the utility of broad theoretical and conceptual repertoires that currently exist in the social sciences to interpret the phenomenon of historical violence. At the same time the real complexity of the issue was acknowledged, because such concepts transcend academic debate and are used in other contexts from the social to the legal. The congress highlighted the importance of theoretical frameworks in studying the traumatic past, but also served as a warning on the danger of endless debates about categories. More relevant than the concepts are the debates around them. That is why fields such as genocide studies and collective violence are so pertinent. From this perspective The Spanish holocaust has served to reawaken both society and academia, enlivening debates about the forms of representation and interpretation of the past in Spain. This is a merit that few books can claim.

But the most important factor that allows us to understand the success of The Spanish holocaust lies in the book's virtues. First I would highlight the extraordinary narrative that Paul Preston has written. He is an author who we already knew could write in a compelling and persuasive manner. And The Spanish holocaust does not disappoint. The way in which he has sensitively and meticulously described the

violence that occurred during the Spanish civil war and its aftermath could leave no one indifferent. This is a narrative that allows the reader to understand and interpret not only the motivations of perpetrators, but also the abject suffering, terror and fear of the victims. Such is Preston's skill as a narrator that the reader seems to be able to even hear the breathing of the characters. But his storytelling ability goes further, making the reader appreciate the parts of the book that could be seen a priori as more arduous. Writing quality is always important for the success for a book, but in the case of the Spanish market this is even more so. Spanish historians have not traditionally been concerned with prose style, which has led to some disaffection on the part of the public with academic literature. The Spanish holocaust is a lesson to Spanish historians on how it is possible to seamlessly blend research and dissemination.

A second strength is the encyclopaedic character of the book. One could almost say that any act of violence that occurred during the civil war has been documented in the book. This of course is an exaggeration, but emphasizes my general point on the depth and range of examples given, which cover the entire Spanish geographical extent. This is thanks to Preston's scholarship. A simple review of the range of literature used demonstrates his erudition. This must have been a daunting task given the vast international historiography on the Spanish civil war.

Despite its vast coverage, The Spanish holocaust is a systematic book. Since the 1980s Spanish historians have made a concerted effort to write the history of violence in Spain during the civil war and Franco's dictatorship. That is why there has been a profusion of studies at local and regional levels. This type of approach has allowed us to become familiar with the dynamics of small-scale violence in great detail, but has sometimes hampered an overarching and total interpretation of the phenomenon. This trend has been mitigated in recent years thanks to the publication of several works

whose purpose is to analyse the different logics of violence nationwide. The Spanish holocaust is part of this group of books, but it has the virtue of being able to combine its analysis on two scales: local/regional and national. At the same time, it brings together the study of violence in the home front during the Spanish civil war, among both the rebels and Republicans. In this way, the author has been able to synthesize and master the basic lines of interpretation that have been developing for decades in Spanish historiography, of which he himself is an essential part. He analyses the violence in the two rears with assiduity, but rejects the simplistic uniform interpretation and the fratricidal war narrative constructed by the Franco regime in the 1960s in which all those involved committed excesses in equal measure. The differences can be seen in the quantity of victims, but more importantly on a qualitative level. There were perpetrators in both rear-guards, but they did not behave according to a similar logic. Violence committed in the rear by the pro-Franco revolt responded to the logic of extermination and cleansing promoted by government institutions. The Republican rear-guard followed a revolutionary logic that was essentially triggered by the military uprising. Faced with the loss of a monopoly of violence by the state, a new set of non-state micro-powers were responsible for violence in the Republican rear-guard. Overall, there would be the same logic of violence among the rebels and Republicans and Preston consistently illustrates this point in the book with qualification where necessary.

In relation to the logics of violence, Paul Preston has made a formidable analysis of the 'theorists of extermination' in the second chapter. The author's argument is that policies of extermination that took place during the civil war were not spontaneous and did not take place in the heat of battle or as a response to revolutionary violence, but derived from an established political culture that was deeply rooted in the Spanish right. It was a political culture that became further radicalized in the context of the Second

Republic. The reform programme from the government advocated by Republicans and socialists exacerbated hatred and contempt within the Spanish right towards their political enemies. Through a process of dehumanization, these 'internal enemies', described as 'against Spain', 'red' and 'Marxist', were marked out for elimination. Their ideologies were interpreted as foreign, of Jewish origin, 'moro' (a derogatory term for the people of Morocco) and Berber. These references had a great impact on the collective imagination because the Spanish colonial army had been involved in an intense war in Morocco in previous years. The organized working classes were seen as a 'mob' with Eastern and Semitic qualities, giving rise to particular racial theories according to which anyone who embraced the ideals of the Republicans or the left was worth no more than an African in Spain. A set of theories that developed the idea of the social and racial inferiority of the 'internal enemy' ultimately formed the legitimating discourse of their extermination during the war.

A key episode addressed in *The Spanish holocaust* is the massacre at Paracuellos, to which Chapter 10 is dedicated. That event is of great significance as the largest massacre in the Republican zone. Between 2,200 and 2,500 prisoners were killed between 7 November and 3 December 1936. It held an important symbolic place in the imaginary of Franco and exposed the potential culpability of one of the most prominent future leaders of the Communist Party of Spain: Santiago Carrillo (about whom Paul Preston has just published a biography). The author masterfully shows all the dynamics that eventually converged in the massacre: the siege of the city by Franco's troops; the Republican government's flight from the capital; the precarious situation of the Republican state; the multiplication of micro-autonomous powers; the fear that the prisoners would fall into the hands of Franco and could assist in the occupation of the city (several of them were military); and the systematic bombing of Madrid and its



impact on an uneasy and vengeful population. Finally, Preston rightly considers that the issue of responsibility cannot be solved by naming an individual or a small number of people. In fact, a massacre like Paracuellos, which took place over a prolonged period and in which different methods were employed, required the involvement of multiple actors. We should therefore talk about collective responsibility.

To conclude, I would like to dwell on one of the few points on which I disagree with the author: his vision of the anarchist movement. And I particularly want to focus on the role given to the violence that occurred in the Republican rear-guard. While I in no way deny the important role that revolutionary violence played within anarchism, in The Spanish holocaust it becomes hegemonic. Reading the book leaves us with the impression that virtually all the violence in the Republican rear-guard was committed by anarchists—on which is projected a homogeneous image of hotheads, fanatics and criminals. Part of this interpretation comes from speeches collected in the anarchist press, which certainly was much more radical and supportive of violence than the press of other political formations. In this regard, recent research has shown clearly how revolutionary violence ‘from below’ was held by the whole spectrum of the labour movement from socialist to communist militants, not excluding of course the anarchists. Members of republican parties, sectors of the middle classes as well as individuals with no previous political affiliation participated. In fact, many of those involved in violence in 1936 were revolutionized and this became their rite of passage into political action. Revolutionary violence played a role in the socialization of the Republican rear-guard. This socialization included socialist, communist and republican activists. Finally, the last chapter is devoted to the post-war period and analyses the efficacy of violence during the dictatorship of Franco. An investment in terror during the civil war and its aftermath ensured the social peace of the cemeteries for nearly forty years.

We could say that *The Spanish holocaust* is Paul Preston's masterpiece, but this claim would lead to two problems. First, it is difficult to choose one masterpiece from an author who has written so widely, with several key titles on the history of Spain. Second, his tireless research work suggests that he will offer us new books in the future, which we will anticipate with great pleasure.